



GAMES FAQ

Q I want to play more games online with my friends. Is there any way I can find out what games they're playing and on which server they're playing them?

A There's a simple way to do this: download Xfire (www.xfire.com). This is a free application that works in a similar way to other instant messaging applications, such as MSN Messenger. But it's also programmed to keep track of which game you're playing, and the server you're playing it on. This information is transmitted to your friends, and vice versa. At a glance you can see what they're doing and then, provided you have the game, join them online.



The client has been designed with gamers in mind, so it doesn't flash up annoying messages that take you back to the desktop when you're playing a game. The current version can use DirectX to bring up an in-game chat window – handy if your friends need to get in touch and you're in the middle of a big Evequest II session. It doesn't work with all games, but the Xfire website has an up-to-date list.

The software is supported by adverts, but they're only games related and appear in a small window on the client, so they're not obtrusive.

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REVIEW ROLE-PLAYING GAME

GAS POWERED GAMES Dungeon Siege II

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £25 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk

DETAILS www.gaspowered.com/ds2

Dungeon Siege was a hack-and-slash fantasy game in the mould of Diablo and Diablo II. While it was on the simple side, it proved entertaining in a mindless sort of way. Dungeon Siege II is more of the same, but Gas Powered Games has added enough new features to stir up fresh interest.

Dungeon Siege II kicks off with character creation, but there's little more to this than choosing a name and a race. Humans, elves, dryads and half-giants all have unique traits making them particularly suited to one of four combat classes, but there's no class selection as such. Instead, the combat class you specialise in is determined by how you play the game. Spend all your time hitting things with swords, and you'll end up skilled in melee; wander around casting spells, and you'll become proficient in magic. The combat classes are not fixed and you can change to a different one at any time, although this is best done early and often to stop your hard-hitting character becoming a no-skill weakling.

There wasn't much more to character development in Dungeon Siege, but the sequel adds a much-needed boost in the form of skill points. Your character accrues these with each new level it attains, and you can use them to buy skills from four skill trees – one for each combat class. The skills offer a combination of special combat talents (two-handed fighting, shield use and so on) and special attacks, and allow for plenty of



Dungeon Siege II concentrates on skills as well as thrills

differentiation even between characters of the same combat class.

You can play solo in Dungeon Siege II or pick up a maximum of six other characters on your travels to help you out. The handy treasure-hauling mules are still around, joined by some new pets, all of which you can improve with treasure to make them more capable in combat. Certain treasures can be enchanted, but you'll need to find suitable reagents and a willing enchanter first.

While there are plenty of side quests to divert you from the main story, you can't wander far from the path you're meant to follow. The three-act storyline provides a mix of battles and puzzles, and there's scope for a bit of role-playing in the various interactions with computer-controlled characters, though some of the voice acting and dialogue is suspect. The locales are rich in detail and beautifully rendered, but while the game has a lush cinematic look, the graphics aren't noticeably different to those of the first game.

Julian Prokaza



Gorgeous graphics; addictive, non-stop action



Relatively linear game play

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP, 1GHz processor, 256MB RAM, 4GB disk space. **Product code** B000197Z2G

HOTLIST ACTION GAME

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £25 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.mx2.co.uk

DETAILS www.rockstargames.com

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas is simply an amazing game, featuring three lush cities, hundreds of varied missions and the chance to do whatever you like. The graphics are lush and look great on a PC's monitor. However, you'll need a joystick to get the most out of it.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 1GHz Pentium III processor, 256MB RAM, 3.6GB disk space. **Product code** GTASA/PCORING/E



HOTLIST SIM AND BATTLE GAME

Stronghold 2

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £18 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.play.com

DETAILS www.stronghold2.com

The sequel to 2001's sleeper hit, Stronghold 2 takes all the castle-building fun of the first game and makes it even better. This time around you can choose to play the sim game, where you must keep your citizens happy, or the war game, where you battle against the computer for control of the map. There's loads of gameplay in this innovative game, which should keep you busy for hours at a time.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, 1.4GHz Pentium 4, 256MB RAM, 32MB graphics card, 2.5GB disk space. **Product code** B0007GIXOW



HOTLIST ONLINE SHOOTER

Battlefield 2

RATING ★★★★★

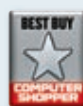
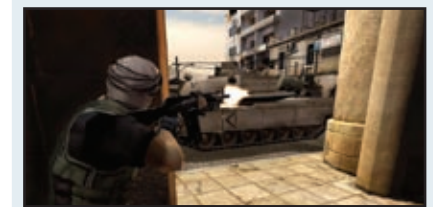
PRICE £27 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.cd-wow.com

DETAILS www.eagames.com

Battlefield 2 updates the original and lets you play with up to 64 online players. Teamwork is the name of the game, and you must use a variety of weapons and vehicles to help achieve your team's objectives. Brilliant fun and stunning to look at, this is one of the best online games available.

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP, 1.7GHz Pentium 4 processor, 512MB RAM, 2.4GB disk space. **Product code** B0006VSLEU





REVIEW MOTORBIKE RACING GAME

THQ
MotoGP 3

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £25 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dvd.co.ukDETAILS www.thq.co.uk

Racing games often fall down when trying to create the illusion of speed, but MotoGP 3 manages to pull off the thrill of riding at up to 200mph, hurtling round corners with your knees just millimetres from the ground.

The backdrops look great – not that you have much time to look at them – while the bikes and riders are superbly detailed. The game ran really smoothly on our test PC at a resolution of 1,280x1,024 using an ATI Radeon X700 Pro graphics card.

MotoGP 3 introduces an extreme mode, which gives the game an arcade feel and includes a selection of fictional tracks. This will appeal to those who want a quick race, but for Moto purists the game's heart still lies in a more realistic racing simulation. Thanks to the game's licence, you get to race as real riders over genuine courses. You have a wide range of controls including the ability to operate the front and rear brakes independently and to lean your rider forwards or backwards. You can do all this on a keyboard, but you're better off with an analogue game pad.

This may sound like a lot for the novice racer to learn, but MotoGP 3 has some tutorial modes in which you can learn the controls by following the movements of a ghost rider. You'll probably need to work through all the tutorials, as learning the techniques they describe is the only way you'll win. Even then, you'll need some practice, as this is a hard game to get to grips with. Don't expect to win your first race.

There's a good selection of multiplayer modes, so you can race online against friends if you get tired of racing against the computer. With excellent graphics and a real feeling of speed, MotoGP 3 is an excellent motorbike racing simulator.

David Ludlow

✓ Excellent graphics; real feeling of speed

✗ Tough to master

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000 or XP, 1GHz processor, 128MB RAM, 700MB disk space. **Product code** TQ62879



Put your motorbike racing ambitions to the test with the exhilarating MotoGP 3

REVIEW FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

TAKE 2
Serious Sam II

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £27 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.play.comDETAILS www.take2europe.com

Serious Sam II takes the lush visuals of Far Cry's beautiful island location and throws in some cute blue Teletubby-style creatures, some guns and lots of enemies. The paper-thin plot has you hunting for a mystical medallion, but it's just a device to explain why you have to face off against hundreds of grim-looking enemies.

And when we say hundreds, that's exactly what we mean. Each stage will see you wiping wave after wave of bizarre creature from the face of the planet. There's a huge range of creatures to fight, from clockwork bulls and demonic creatures on wheels to our personal favourite, screaming scarecrows with bombs for heads. You're armed with the usual range of weaponry, including pistols, shotguns, rocket launchers and, obviously, bomb-carrying parrots.

While the colourful graphics and amusing array of weapons and monsters makes Serious Sam II fun to look at, it's repetitive. While Half-Life 2 has chases through cities and coordinated enemy attacks, Serious Sam just throws in lots of stupid monsters. It can get dull and frustrating. But it does pull the odd sequence out of the bag to renew your interest, such as the giant spiders you meet outside the city walls. Flying between their legs in our jet car reminded us of *Lord of the Rings* and *The Empire Strikes Back* – great stuff.

The graphics are gorgeous and the textures look amazing, particularly on the animals. The game has been well designed, too, and should run well on most PCs.

If you require a little more plot and variation in your games, Serious Sam II is not for you, but if you want lush graphics, strange and amazing weapons and hordes of bad guys to shoot, it's an entertaining diversion.

David Ludlow

✓ Beautiful graphics; huge choice of weapons

✗ Repetitive game play

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000 or XP, 1.5GHz processor, 512MB RAM



Serious Sam II combines realistic graphics with lots of explosive characters such as scarecrows and parrots

REVIEW STRATEGY GAME

CDV SOFTWARE
Blitzkrieg 2

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £25 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.play.comDETAILS www.cdv.de

If you enjoy the endless parade of World War II documentaries on UKTV History, Blitzkrieg 2 is the game for you. In this real-time strategy, you take charge of German, US and Russian forces in three campaigns spread across the globe.

The range of units on offer is staggering – if you've seen it on TV, it's in Blitzkrieg 2. Tanks are the focus of the game and come in a wide variety, but you won't get far without the other units. Infantry, artillery and planes are all essential to your success. Artillery includes heavy machine guns, anti-tank guns, field guns, mortars and anti-aircraft varieties.

A comprehensive tutorial helps you get used to the game's controls. You'll need it, as they are quite complex. For example, placing a tank in a defensive position is not as simple as directing it to your line of defence. To be truly effective, it must be angled towards the enemy advance and entrenched as well. We enjoyed this added detail in the game, but some may find it fiddly and tiresome.

Mission objectives include the usual defend and attack scenarios, plus patrols, rescues and races to capture key locations. The missions are littered with set-piece attacks resulting in firefights. Various locations, from the jungles of the Philippines to snow-bound Russian towns, add further variety.

Battlefields are recreated in full 3D and look beautiful. Night missions show up the great lighting effects and the devastation of a bombing run is accompanied by fantastic explosions and pillars of smoke. The camera can be rotated freely and tilted. The zoom is minimal, though, and while the default view is well judged, more control would be useful.

Blitzkrieg 2 is ideal for anyone after classic real-time strategy in familiar historical surroundings. It is well executed, fun to play and era buffs will love it.

Seth Barton

✓ Great graphics, historically accurate units and campaigns

✗ Limited camera control

REQUIREMENTS 1GHz processor, 320MB RAM, DirectX 9.0c, 64MB Hardware T&L graphics card, 2.5GB disk space, DVD drive. **Product code** B0009RF71Y



Have fun with bombs and bone up on your history at the same time with Blitzkrieg 2